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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the content of the proposed national standards for U.S. history and world history. The document suggests shortcomings of the developed standards as being without an emphasis on the themes of democracy and western civilization and an overemphasis on multicultural ideas. Specific standards in each of the areas are addressed with noted weaknesses within each area. The standards debate, according to the paper, may ultimately make a contribution to the educational reform process and the strengthening of history teaching. (EH)

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BETTER WAYS TO TELL OUR STORY

A Critique of the Proposed National History Standards

By Arch Puddington

The publication of proposed national standards for the teaching of United States history and world history has provoked one of the angriest educational controversies of recent times. And while historians and educators have figured prominently in the debate, the question of how to deal with the standards has caught the attention of a much wider audience, ranging from columnists and editorial writers to government officials, even to members of the U.S. Senate.

The standards have been criticized as too long--the combined documents run to more than 600 pages--and as too sophisticated and wide-ranging for high school students to grasp. But the most pointed criticisms have focused on the crucial issues of content and interpretation. According to the critics, the standards reflect a school of historical thought that sees nothing unique in the American experience, is skeptical of American achievements, values multiculturalism over the unifying features of American society, and treats the contributions of Western civilization as no more significant than the contributions of ancient Persia or the Incas of Peru.

Lynne V. Cheney, the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), has been the most prominent critic. Cheney, ironically, approved a grant that enabled the National Center for History in the Schools of UCLA to undertake the project, a decision she now says she deeply regrets. Cheney has described the standards for American history as reflective of a politically correct mind-set that sees only good in non-western civilizations while regarding the accomplishments of white Americans with automatic suspicion. The standards, she asserts, minimize the importance of great events and great men, overemphasize marginal personalities, and displace the sweep of seminal events like the American Revolution with compare-and-contrast and multiple-perspectives exercises.

Many of Cheney's criticisms have been echoed by prominent educators and historians, including some who were, like Cheney, early supporters of the standards' movement. The respected historian of American education, Diane Ravitch, called the U.S. standards "deeply flawed" and traced much of the problem to the political biases of some of the standards' authors. Another distinguished historian, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, wrote that "the sense of progress and accomplishment that has characterized Americans' history of their country has virtually disappeared" from the draft of the standards released to the public.

The standards were also excoriated on the floor of the Senate. Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.), called the standards for American history "ideology masquerading as history" and said the document should be "recalled like a shipload of badly contaminated food." A Democrat, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, labeled the standards a "terrific disappointment" and asserted that the published draft "is full of valueless, all-points-of-view-are-equally-valid nonsense." In a vote notable for its near-unanimity, the Senate by a 99-1 margin condemned the standards and called for their rejection by a certification panel.

The standards have their defenders as well. Some, like Thomas Holt, president of the American Historical Association, assert that the attacks must be seen within the context of the Republican congressional majority's proposals to cut or eliminate the NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts. But most simply deny that the standards reflect any particular political bias. As Charles Greenberg, president of the Chicago Historical Society, put it, the standards offer a "balanced view of our history that neither reflexively dismisses nor uncritically praises our accomplishments as a people."

Clearly, the differences that separate the standards' critics from supporters go well beyond questions of nuance and balance. In one sense, the standards debate represents an extension of a decades-old argument over the nature of America and its proper role in the world. It also reflects a more recent controversy over the continuing importance of Western civilization pitting those who believe that there is something uniquely worthy in the West's tradition of democracy and humanism against those who are convinced that the West's values are no more significant than the values of non-Western cultures.

The debate carries crucial implications for the future of American education. The standards movement grew out of a widely shared concern that American students lagged seriously behind children in Europe and Japan in almost all of the important disciplines. History was identified as one of the subjects where American student performance was deficient; standardized tests repeatedly indicated widespread unfamiliarity with key events and personalities in American history and an even more widespread ignorance of world history.

In 1991, a bipartisan commission created by Congress endorsed the concept of national standards along with the idea of state and regional assessments of students' performance. Money was then provided by the Department of Education and NEH to various educational groups for the development of national standards in history, geography, civics, the arts, foreign languages, and English.

The legislation that established the procedures for drafting the standards did not and does not require states to adopt the standards developed by the groups. States retain complete authority to develop and adopt standards of their choosing. Meanwhile,

congressional legislation has cast doubt over the future of a national standards movement. Nonetheless, the standards for history and other disciplines retain an importance as models for the states, many of which have already begun the process of establishing their own curriculum guidelines.

This should be a source of serious concern for those who believe that the purpose of history curriculum is not simply to stuff students full of facts and interpretations about the world around them but to help prepare students to participate in the democratic civic life of their country. For, if one believes that a goal of history is to strengthen democracy by teaching democracy's story, then these two standards documents--one for U.S. history and one for world history--are seriously flawed.

A careful analysis of the standards indicates that the critics' harsh judgment is usually justified. Indeed, the standards fall short even when measured by the criteria that the authors originally established. Thus, while those who drafted the standards complain that the old rote memorization technique made history boring, the work they have produced strips history of its passion and dynamism through its emphasis on social science exercises, its stress on cultural comparisons as opposed to narrative history, and its weak handling of political ideas. Another stated goal, the preparation of students for the era of global interdependence, has been subverted by a failure to sufficiently understand Western culture, the civilization that shaped the students' own society. An understanding of the cultural roots of one's own society is a precondition for gaining an effective understanding of foreign cultures; this rule holds true for students in Japan, France, Mexico, or any other country, and is not a reflection of American particularism. And because the standards ask students to not only be familiar with but also to analyze and interpret issues and events far distant in time and place, they actually encourage the memorization of interpretations instead of promoting genuine understanding of a particular historical issue.

WORLD HISTORY STANDARDS

In the prologue to the world history standards, a section entitled "Significance of History for the Educated Citizen" sets forth the proposition that history must differentiate "between relevant historical antecedents that properly inform analyses of current issues and those antecedents that are clearly irrelevant." One wishes that those responsible for formulating the standards had taken this admonition to heart. Indeed, a failure to draw a distinction between the relevant and irrelevant ranks as one of the world history standards' most egregious shortcomings. Instead of a guide to the great ideas, events, and personalities of history, the authors have produced a themeless stew of cultures and civilizations with hardly more attention devoted to peoples who decisively shaped world history than to those whose global influence was relatively limited.

The most serious weakness of the world history standards is their failure to focus on the great themes of Western civilization and the two or three other most

significant world cultures. Instead, the standards stress what might be called globalist themes. Thus, headings attached to the various chronological eras include titles like "Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter," "Intensified Hemispheric Interaction," "The Emergence of the First Global Age."

A de-emphasis of Western civilization and Western ideas is implicit in the globalist structure. The West, of course, is not ignored: Most of the important themes of Western history are dealt with, and some are explored quite thoroughly. Regrettably, the Western tradition, not to mention the most significant non-Western cultures, are smothered by a potpourri of cultures, civilizations, traditions, cross-cultural encounters, and other themes of a globalist nature.

Thus, the standards for the period 1450-1670 ask students to analyze "the relationship between Muslims and Hindus in the [Mughal] empire and [compare] Akhbar's governing methods and religious ideas with those of other Mughal emperors, such as Aurangzeb." As part of a standard on the rise of Islam, students are asked to evaluate how "the migration of Turkic peoples from Turkestan into Southwest Asia and India in the 11th and 12th centuries contributed to Islamic expansion and the retreat of Byzantium and Greek Christian civilization." Moving to the twentieth century, an exercise accompanying a standard focusing on Communist China asks students to: "Read excerpts from Mao Zedong's *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (1927). Discuss Mao's understanding of the potential of the peasantry as a revolutionary force. Compare Mao's analysis of the potential of the peasantry with classic Marxist theory. Discuss how Mao's adaptation of Marxism fits the Chinese situation. Analyze Mao's emergence as a major force in the Chinese Communist movement."

The purpose of citing the above examples is not to denigrate the importance of any particular non-Western civilization. The issue is rather one of balance and historical judgment. To begin with, the standards are much too difficult, much too sophisticated, much too all-encompassing for high school students. Indeed, few doctoral candidates, much less high school sophomores, could boast a firm grasp of the material outlined in the world history standards, and there are surely many tenured professors who would find an examination based on the standards tough going.

To expect, for example, that students can master the intricacies of the rise of Islam in less than a semester is unrealistic, to put it mildly. Yet standard after standard asks that students demonstrate a grasp of epochs, civilizations, ideas, beliefs, scientific developments, political movements, and similarly broad questions that university students study for many years.

The world history standards are notably weak on the Cold War, the most important struggle in the lifetime of today's students. Surprisingly, given the standards' globalist emphasis, the idea of the Cold War as a struggle that shaped the course of international affairs for over four decades is entirely absent. Students would look in

vain for a clue as to why the United States adopted a grand foreign policy strategy of Communist containment; instead, the struggle between communism and democracy is reduced to bland phrases like "the United States and Soviet competition for influence or dominance." This is the vocabulary historians employ to describe the economic rivalry between the U.S. and Japan; a conflict of Cold War dimensions deserves a description that more accurately indicates the stakes involved.

Likewise, the standards almost totally ignore Eastern Europe in the modern period. While the standards ask students to become familiar with the histories of a lengthy list of post-colonial Third World countries, as well as conflict-ridden countries like Chile and Iran, no attention is devoted to post-war Poland, a flashpoint of Cold War conflict, nor to Hungary or Czechoslovakia, where two of the most important Cold War invasions occurred. Also ignored are the Baltic states, Ukraine and the other nations that separated from the Soviet Union. Anti-Communist freedom movements, like Solidarity, are omitted, as are opposition leaders like Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, while the Soviet Union's policies in Eastern Europe are sugar-coated by mild references to Moscow's "political influence" in the region and to its interference in elections. The standards are also inadequate in their treatment of Mao Zedong, providing no hint of the vast criminality for which his regime was responsible.

The unsatisfactory treatment of the Cold War is symptomatic of an often weak and tentative approach to Western civilization. The authors seem to have taken special care to avoid placing Western culture or Western ideas at the center of things by the inclusion of a great mass of non-Western material and by the globalist structure of the enterprise. One consequence of this structure is to make practically invisible the titanic clash of the most influential twentieth-century political ideas--fascism, communism, and democracy. In fact, a weakness in political ideas is a notable feature of the world history standards.

Those who support the standards accuse critics of ethnocentrism and willful ignorance of other cultures, especially non-white cultures. Yet, despite the impressive racial and cultural diversity of the American population, the fact remains that the United States is a product of Western civilization and Western ideas. While the West is certainly not without sin, Western values have provided the basis for the universalist values to which practically all nations profess to aspire: liberty, democracy, the rule of law, equality before the law. A major purpose of the study of history, one would think, is to illuminate why America cherishes the political and ethical values on which the society is based. Furthermore, by concentrating on Western themes, the standards could have helped ensure that future generations of Americans at least have a firm understanding of the cultures and civilizations that have had the most profound influence on our own society. Instead, the standards encourage a curriculum that provides a superficial assessment of all cultures and all civilizations through the ages, an approach that practically ensures that students will understand nothing.

UNITED STATES HISTORY STANDARDS

While the American history standards avoid some of the pitfalls that plague the world standards, there are problems here as well. The most serious problem derives from the document's obsession with "inclusiveness," the result of which is something approaching history by racial and gender quota.

The authors seem driven by the need to overcompensate for the failure of past history textbooks to adequately discuss the history of racial minorities and women. In fact, American history texts have corrected this deficiency over the years. During the 1970s and 1980s, history textbooks were produced that provided a great amount of material on the history of blacks; practically every history text in use today includes extensive material on the contributions of black Americans, slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, black heroes, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, even the debate over affirmative action. No special focus on inclusiveness is required to guarantee that American students become familiar with black history. Much the same goes for the treatment of women and non-white immigrant groups. Textbooks are still overly inclined to treat black history as a separate, stand-alone theme, shunted off to sidebars and boxes, instead of fully integrating the black experience into the main flow of American history. Unfortunately, the national standards not only do not correct this tendency; they reinforce it.

There is, on the other hand, a very real problem with the concept of inclusiveness taken to an extreme. Historical interpretations change through the years; individuals, groups, or events that were once ignored are often re-assessed, and the biases that distorted the depiction of certain episodes or peoples are corrected through an ongoing process of historical re-evaluation. In some quarters, inclusiveness however, has come to imply history that is specially concocted to ensure not only that certain groups are dealt with but also to ensure that they are dealt with favorably. In the current highly politicized environment, inclusiveness demands that women be assessed by the standards of feminist history, that blacks be assessed by the standards of Afrocentric history, that Latinos and Asians be assessed by the standards of multicultural history.

The U.S. history standards document is not extremist. Some sections, such as those dealing with the origins of the Constitution, might be regarded as models for curriculum development. But it is, unfortunately, infected by some of the excesses associated with the inclusiveness concept. Indeed, according to a letter to the *Baltimore Sun* written by one member of the National Council for History Standards, an entity that took part in writing the standards, one of the "critical and overriding elements" that instructed the work of the standards' authors was a "need for ethnic, racial, religious, and gender diversity and inclusiveness in all history themes."

The results of the diversity emphasis are apparent throughout the document. The introduction to the section dealing with the American Revolution, for example, asks students "to see the Revolution through different sets of eyes--enslaved and free African Americans, Native Americans, white men and women of different social classes, religions, ideological dispositions, regions, and occupations."

A proposed exercise for grades five and six entails analyzing how education in colonial New England was related to the "gender roles" boys and girls were expected to adopt as adults. The Revolutionary era includes an entire standard devoted to the diversity theme; students are asked to assess the Revolutionary objectives of various groups, why "whites, Indians, and blacks remained loyal to the British," to analyze the contributions of blacks to the new country, to investigate "the ideas on which women drew in arguing for new roles and rights." Another entire standard is devoted to changing gender roles during the period of westward expansion; students are asked to compare changing gender roles in the North, South, and West, to evaluate gender roles along regional, racial, and class lines, and to explain how gender roles changed during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The standards for the Industrial Era include questions about the gender roles of farmers, miners, and ranchers in the West; a standard for the same period asks students to explain "how gender, race, ethnicity, and skill affected employment in different regions of the country." Similarly, in the standards for the Great Depression, students are expected to know how the economic crisis affected gender roles, and what its impact was on blacks, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians. Students are also expected to know the impact of the New Deal on blacks, women, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians. Likewise, they are asked about the commitment of the nascent industrial trade union movement to blacks, women, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians.

Again, the most serious weakness is not with any specific standard or exercise, but rather with the cumulative effect of the emphasis on group roles and group history. At certain points, this document resembles not so much a guide to history teaching as it does a political party platform, with its laundry list of promised benefits for the various interest groups in the party coalition. The satisfaction of group demands--so much for blacks, so much for women, so much for Latinos--at times overwhelms the story of the American experience.

Furthermore, while certain groups are given generous treatment, others--especially white European immigrants--are nearly invisible. Missing is the story of immigrant success and the remarkable assimilation of the various waves of immigrant groups. One of the most interesting chapters in American history is the Jewish experience--how Jews achieved, really for the first time in their often-tragic history, a home that eventually afforded them social equality and security from political oppression. Instead of this story of democratic success, the standards, through their almost obsessive attention paid to women, blacks, Latinos, and American Indians,

projects the image of a country in which the dominant theme is an unrelieved saga of racial and sexual oppression.

Furthermore, the unique history of black Americans is actually diluted by the standards' pervasive multiculturalism. Race is one of the most important themes of the American story; race and racial controversy have led to civil war, contributed substantially to the federalization of government power, produced powerful changes in the legal system, influenced the rise and decline of left-wing political movements, exerted a major impact on the economic and cultural life of the South and of the major American cities. The nation's response to the racial challenge has played an important part in shaping the country's moral image; for many Americans, the name Emmett Till is forever linked with the most shameful chapters in our history, while the name Jackie Robinson stands as a symbol of national moral regeneration.

Unfortunately, the great and, in many respects, ennobling, theme of black America's struggle for equality has been buried beneath a mass of formula multicultural "perspectives." And by embracing the currently trendy vision of America as a grand mosaic of warring racial, ethnic, and sexual blocs, the standards have failed the challenge of incorporating the black experience as a normal, integrated part of the history curriculum, instead of, as is too often the case today, a theme separate and apart from the other themes of the American experience.

Another problem derives from the globalist approach to the period of early European conquest and colonization. By stressing the coming together of three cultures--Native American, black African, and white European--the standards distort the early history of the hemisphere by suggesting that the European role was no more significant than the other two, preliterate and relatively backward, cultures. The European contribution is, in fact, belittled by the heavy stress on the achievements of Native American and African cultures and the use of politically loaded terms to describe the early European settlers. Thus it is suggested that Indians and Africans produced great civilizations prior to their encounters with Europe; there is, surprisingly, practically no material on the highly diverse and highly advanced (for their time) cultures that produced America's first European settlers. Here, as in the standards for world history, the authors seem driven by what was once called a Third Worldist perspective. Just as the world history standards were reluctant to delve into imperfections in non-European societies, likewise the U.S. standards go to great efforts to avoid casting the non-white peoples of this country in a negative light, a charitable attitude that is most definitely not extended to whites.

Again, like the world standards, the U.S. document's treatment of the Cold War is unimpressive. In an introductory section to the period, the standards' authors assert:

> **the swordplay of the Soviet Union and the United States rightfully claims attention because it led to the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as the Berlin airlift, Cuban missile crisis, American intervention**

in many parts of the world, a huge investment in scientific research, and environmental damage that will take generations to rectify.

This passage encapsulates many of the flaws of this document. One of the most momentous clashes of this century--indeed of any century--a confrontation between two competing political systems that stretched over four decades, produced a series of invasions and wars, posed the threat of nuclear conflict, and culminated in the collapse of a once-mighty totalitarian empire, has been reduced to a question of environmental degradation and "swordplay." And when the standards do, briefly, examine the roots of the Cold War, the result is a profound misreading of events, as when the authors counterpose American "support for self-determination" in Eastern Europe to "the U.S.S.R.'s desire for security" in the region.

The standards also distort the Cold War's impact on American society. As a number of critics have pointed out, inordinate attention has been devoted to the phenomenon of McCarthyism. Indeed, the issue is not simply that the standards make reference to Senator Joseph McCarthy or McCarthyism nineteen times but that McCarthyism seems to be the only Cold War-related issue dealt with at any length by the authors. For the period covering the Cold War, McCarthyism provides the theme for three out of five exercises for grades seven and eight; for grades nine-twelve, McCarthyism and the "Red Scare" are the only issues that students are asked to address. McCarthyism thus receives as much attention as the civil rights movement, and much more than the issues that triggered the Cold War. On the nature of communism, the standards are silent. Was the Soviet system different in fundamental ways from American democracy? What were the Soviet Union's goals? What tactics did communist movements employ to gain, and then keep, power? An understanding of such issues is crucial to even a superficial grasp of twentieth-century history. The standards, however, ignore these questions almost totally.

CONCLUSION

The failures of both U.S. and world history standards can be traced to several sources. The authors made a serious blunder in emphasizing the interpretation of sophisticated and complex material instead of stressing that students learn the facts before they take up the challenge of historical analysis. There is also too much emphasis on social science and not enough on simply telling the story of historical events.

A more serious mistake was the refusal of the authors to emphasize the related themes of democracy and Western culture. Had the standards been placed within a thematic context grounded in the democracy idea, many of the problems outlined here would have been forestalled. Organizing the project around a democracy theme would certainly have produced a more dynamic document. Democracy's story is inherently interesting, whether the subject is the American Revolution, the civil rights protest movement, or the struggle of Poland's Solidarity trade union movement.

Organizing the standards around the twin themes of democracy and Western civilization would, of course, have produced a guide to history teaching that was not value neutral. The struggle for democracy is a struggle with serious implications for political morality, and an emphasis on the history and ideas of the West implies a high degree of respect for the political and cultural institutions of European civilization.

The standards, by contrast, assume an attitude of detachment that, while fine for doctoral candidates, is hardly appropriate for students in high school or junior high. Those who have written in defense of the standards seem to believe that there is something suspect in the idea that history should somehow cultivate a respect for America, the American political system, and the Western political tradition.

Here it is worth noting that the standards movement did not develop in a vacuum. Those who supported the standards idea--political leaders, business leaders, educators--acted out of a deep concern that a decline in the educational achievement of American students would have serious long-term consequences for the entire society, especially in an age of enhanced global competition.

Just as a grasp of science, mathematics, and English are essential to America's future, so is an understanding of the roots of a free society. The decline of civic consciousness is a major problem today, especially among the younger generation. An understanding of our history is not merely a matter of learning facts and interpretations but is part of a process to strengthen our free institutions. And one goal of a history curriculum would be to instill a sense of loyalty, even patriotism, among students. As Sidney Hook declared, we should "seek to develop that loyalty directly through honest inquiry into the functioning of a democratic community, by learning its history, celebrating its heroes, and noting its achievements."

To foster an appreciation of freedom, students need to understand our own democratic system, as well as the ideas and political movements that led to oppression, tyranny, and genocide. This means, above all, the great totalitarian systems of this century--Hiterlism, Stalinism, Maoism. But it also requires that students be familiar with other forms of tyranny, including those motivated by racial hatred, ethnic chauvinism, religious intolerance, rule by thugs and gangsters--the kinds of oppressive regimes that today or in the recent past spread terror and death in South Africa, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia.

One consequence of the failure of civic education is the growing belief in the most bizarre theories about the way the world works. Some of these notions emanate from the Right; some from the Left. Some conspiracy theories are driven by white racism; some, such as the apparently widespread belief that white doctors are infecting black babies with the AIDS virus, have their source in black paranoia. The tragic bombing of a federal office building in Oklahoma City revealed yet another manifestation of contemporary paranoia: the conviction that an oppressive federal

government is preparing a secret plan to strip away the rights of liberties of the American people.

While there is no single reason for the rise in conspiracy thinking, this phenomenon certainly does not reflect well on our education system's competence in teaching American history. Nor is this a problem that will be alleviated by the further spread of multicultural teaching. If anything, multiculturalism will exacerbate the racial fears and myths that lurk behind some of the more irrational fantasies by encouraging racial particularism and ethnic separatism.

Moreover, in a society marked by increased racial and religious difference, it becomes even more important for the public schools to offer a curriculum that stresses the ideas that Americans hold in common. The standards, by contrast, emphasize--indeed, exaggerate--the issues that are dividing America. The America of the history standards is an alienating place--that is, for every group except well-off white men.

The sharp and widespread dissatisfaction with the standards, and the tenor of the criticism, suggests a strong degree of support for a history curriculum organized around themes of democracy and Western civilization. It also suggests much opposition to history by quota; history that is resolutely neutral in its attitude to the American experience; and the other fashionable notions whose presence is reflected in the standards' documents. Hopefully, the standards debate may ultimately make a contribution to the educational reform process and the strengthening of history teaching.

Arch Puddington is a senior scholar with Freedom House, a national organization that studies, monitors, and supports political rights and civil liberties around the world and that educates Americans about the needs of democracy and the threats to it. He has previously served as Deputy Director, New York Bureau, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and as Research and Program Director, A Philip Randolph Institute.